

## French Schools in Damascus: Missionary Presence, Diplomatic Rivalries and Proselytizing.

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### 1. Several allegiances

It is important to be careful about the identity of the actors: all had multiple identities and delivered different speeches according to the different audiences. The example of the Lazarists of the province of Syria is remarkable. The Congregation of the Mission seemed to be a French and Latin teaching congregation. It was actually more complex. All the implemented strategies changed according to the position of each:

- There existed primarily a logic specific to the congregation.

The “*maison-mère*” (head office) was in Paris.<sup>1</sup> The Lazarists in Damascus thus depended on Paris for their recruitment or very tight financing. Subjected to the directives of the general superior, generally of French nationality, they needed to teach the French language. They adhered finally to the image conveyed by the missionary literature produced or read by the congregation.

The Province in Beirut to which the house of Damascus was attached had however its own logic. Above all, they were financial requirements, each mission had to finance the headquarters in Beirut which did not fail to put pressure in order to obtain the payment of the contributions. The Province answered other priorities than that of the congregation in Paris: the obsession of recruiting locals in order to ensure the continuity of the mission in Syria, community pressures, in particular on behalf of the Maronites, to make more room for the Christians in their establishments (emptied of its Moslem pupils) and to open free schools reserved only to Christians, preferably Catholics. This explains why the Lazarists in Beirut did not have the same apprehension about Arabic, a necessary means of communication for a local apostolate.

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<sup>1</sup> The General Curia moved to Rome after the Second world War thus demonstrating the internationalization of the congregation and the evolution of the Missionary Church.

– Finally there were internal problems remaining with the Syrian mission. Each house made different choices according to the local situation. Devotion towards the Armenians in Cilicia and north of Syria involved other intentions than the priority given to Damascus or to the hospital in the Lebanese Mountains, charity intended only for Christians or the school. the choice was made to support elitism or to favor the Christian communities. In Damascus, the Saint-Vincent college was thus opened to “the sons of the best families” of the Christian and Muslim society. The free Saint-Joseph school was reserved to the children of the poor Catholic families of Bâb Tûma, the schools of the Muslim suburb of Mîdan taken over on behalf of the melkite patriarchate, evening classes intended for the elite of the administration and the Ottoman army eager to acquire a European education, like the “commercial classes” for the middle-class Moslem businessmen of Damascus. Finally the orphanage of the *Sisters of Charity* was intended to train “dressmakers and laundresses in great demand by the industrialists and their families”.<sup>2</sup> These local situations involve different methods, the choice of French or Arabic, proselytizing or not, proximity with the Moslems or not. There was also a fierce competition between the houses while Damascus eclipsed Aleppo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conflicts of interest, sometimes personal conflicts. The Tripoli mission thus suffered at the end of the Ottoman period from internal quarrels caused, at the same time, by the competition with Beirut and Damascus, the divisions within the Melkite community and the claims of certain Greek families to have the control of the lazarus congregation, or an internal affair of pedophilia. The same competition considerably weakened the Damascus mission at the end of the sixties and partially contributed to end the lazarus presence in Syria.

I have no time to explain the presence of interlocking allegiances must be pointed out:

1. In Rome, with the *Propaganda fide*

In Rome, the lazarusists depended on Propaganda fide which was responsible for the mission in the Ottoman Empire, but whose interests diverged from those of the congregation as well as the French government. Latinization which the lazarusists promoted in their schools was encouraged

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<sup>2</sup> Report of the French Consul on the schools of Damascus addressed to the embassy in Constantinople, January 29, 1911. Correspondence of Damascus consulate.

before the pontificate of Leo III and then continued in spite of the encyclical *Orientalium Dignitas* (November 1894). At the end of the XIXe century, the base of the apostolate missionary in Damascus still continued to impose a Latin religiosity. This concerned all the pupils of Christian confession, especially those which seem most receptive to a Latin education, like the Association of the Children of Mary Immaculate which was the privileged instrument of the missionaries in latinizing the Christian youth.<sup>3</sup>

2. In Paris, with the Foreign Office (which defined the cultural diplomacy of France in the East) and the ministry of Interior (*at a moment when worship by the congregations was viewed with hostility*)

In Paris, the lazarists had to obey their head office, situated at rue de Sevres, as well as the Foreign Office which defined the cultural diplomacy of France in the East. They also had to take the policy of the ministry of Interior into account at a moment when worship by the congregations was viewed with hostility. It was Jules Ferry who actually interceded in 1884 with the general superior so that the lazarists in Damascus could express an “enlightened patriotism”. He was directly aiming at the Visitor-General of the lazarists at Beirut. The latter was criticised for being too close to the apostolic delegate and future patriarch Mgr Piavi and for following the Italian stance to Palestine too blindly.<sup>4</sup> Jules Ferry was able to obtain resignations of several fellow-members from the general superior., Jules Ferry even wrote “The Frenchness of the order to which he had the honour of belonging prohibited him from associating its name to such an event”.

<sup>5</sup> They were thus confronted with different or contradictory logic issued from Paris. This explains why the French missionaries couldn’t be impervious to the metropolitan stakes at the end of the XIXe century, the fight for secularism, sudden economic starts, anti-semitism or nationalism in connection with Alsace-Moselle. The French government worried in 1898 about nomination in Damascus of several lazarists coming from the provinces lost in 1870, thus wondering “if Mr.

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<sup>3</sup> C.M. Damascus. February 15, 1885. *Cahier des conseils domestiques* 1868-1902.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of the general superior of the Congregation of the Mission to the Visitor, January 12, 1885. *Siria*, S.R. 3. Files Propaganda.

<sup>5</sup> Letter of Jules Ferry the general superior of the Congregation of the Mission, December 24, 1884. *Siria*, S.R. 3.

Bouvy, from Lorraine, felt French, some claiming that he didn't have to choose after 1870.”<sup>6</sup> The consulate even wrote that the new superior who had a name of Germanic consonance, Alphonse Bernhard, was German. “He is Alsatian but feels German. Note that my fellow-members will be amazed to see German being appointed especially when William II arrives.”<sup>7</sup>

3. In Syria with the Catholic church (like the Lazarist mission of Jerusalem torn between its French and German members at the time of the visit of Kaiser William II in 1898)

The Lazarists couldn't thus free themselves from the assistance of the Oeuvre d'Orient or the Propagation de la foi (Work of the East or the Propagation of the faith), French work marked by Lyons' influence on the East.<sup>8</sup> The competition between Lazarists and Jesuits as well as the supremacy of Latin is also explained by colonial competition between Paris, Lyon and Marseilles.

The Catholic church finally imposed sometimes contradictory requirements on the apostolate of the missionaries Lazarists in Damascus: missionary work, German Church, Eastern Churches. The Lazarists couldn't thus free themselves from the assistance of the Work of the East or the Propagation of the faith, French work marked by Lyons' influence on the East.<sup>9</sup> The competition between Lazarists and Jesuits as well as the supremacy of Latin is also explained by colonial competition between Paris, Lyon and Marseilles. In addition, several Lazarists installed in the East were not French nationality and were sent in particular by the province of Cologne. Subjected to the play of the European powers in the Ottoman Empire, the Lazarist mission of Jerusalem was torn between its French and German members at the time of the visit of Kaiser William II in 1898.

<sup>10</sup> One should not forget either the presence of other French congregations and foreign missionaries who entered into competition with the Lazarists. The latter thus played a very

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<sup>6</sup> Confidential letter of the French Consul to the ambassador in Constantinople, September 11, 1898. Correspondence Damascus consulate. Since there were many members from Lorraine and Alsace among the missionaries who left France after 1870 to join Levant, it was easy to reproach them for their disloyalty.

<sup>7</sup> Note of the French Consul to the ambassador in Constantinople, September 9, 1898. Sent to the Foreign Office. Correspondence Damascus consulate.

<sup>8</sup> *L'Orient des Lyonnais*, (Emmanuelle) Perrin and (Jean-Claude) David, éd., Lyon, CNRS, 2010 to be published.

<sup>9</sup> *L'Orient des Lyonnais*, (Emmanuelle) Perrin and (Jean-Claude) David, éd., Lyon, CNRS, 2010 to be published.

<sup>10</sup> (Jérôme) Bocquet, « Missionnaires français et allemands au Levant », in (Dominique) Trimbur, *Europaër in der Levante (19.-20. Jahrhundert)*, Munich, Oldenburg, 2004, p.59.

ambiguous game towards the Marist brothers whom they had however sent for in 1913 to Damascus in response to a request from the French Foreign Office . Competition was even more severe with the Italian Franciscan missionaries with which they disputed the supervision of the open Latin parish in 1911 at the instigation of *Propaganda fide* in the new European district of Salahiyyé. They were finally the claims of the Eastern Churches to exert their right of supervision on the Latin missionaries. They were, in fact, very reticent to let their pupils follow their worship at the Saint-Vincent college while they forced them to attend the Latin masses. They did not even authorize them to leave the establishment to go to their community churches. In 1911, the Lazarists in Damascus thus entered a violent conflict with the Maronite patriarchate who orchestrated a strike by the professors at the Saint-Vincent college whereas in Mount-Lebanon the Congregation of the Mission was allied to the patriarch.

## 2. “Double France”<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to point out some continuities in the practices, recruitment and talk of the French missionaries, whether they belong to a Latin congregation or to the Israeli Alliance or, later, to the French *Mission Laïque (secular mission)* and Protestant congregations. The French schools in Damascus at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thus offer a good example of this “double France” at work in the Ottoman Empire.

The apostolate of the missionaries in Syria served the “mission civilisatrice” (civilizing mission). It meant, first, making the asserted choice to teach in French.

This teaching implied that the Christian populations, to whom the missionaries were sent, would be disadvantaged. Thus in 1871 Lazarists in Damascus appealed to their general superior in Paris to circumvent the orders of their provincial superior in Beirut and the catholic hierarchy. Those indeed required “French classes” to close, and Moslem pupils attracted to this teaching to leave. The goal was to train Levantines just like Kurd Ali who attended Saint-Vincent college.

Missionaries also had to look after people, for instance in dispensaries held by the Sisters of

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<sup>11</sup> (Patrick) Cabanel, “ Les deux vocations : catholique ou laïque ? La France, le Levant et l’islam ”, in (G.) Audisio, dir., *Religion et identités*, Toulouse, Publ. Université de Provence, 1998, p. 202.

Charity, the sisters of Saint-Joseph or the Charity of Besancon (in Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli or Acre for example), the Saint-Louis hospital opened by the Lazarists in the new districts of eastern Damascus, and the battle against epidemics. It was this image of the mission which the *Filles de la Charité* conveyed in France through hagiographic literature, Marian devotion and the worship of the Miraculous Medal.

Fighting the cholera allowed the missionaries who had settled in Bilâd al-Shâm to nurse, civilize and convert people. Lazarists claimed that the doctors of the Saint-Louis hospital were the only agents of Western modernity in Damascus. This meant refusing any desire of reform from the Ottoman administration even as the *tanzimat* had shown their project of modernization of the empire. Looking after patients diseased with cholera (a frequent epidemic in 19<sup>th</sup> century Damascus as in the other big cities of the Ottoman Empire) meant allowing them to be in contact with Muslims, entering the intimacy of the families, and even converting them on their deathbed.

As Patrick Cabanel said, “France of Levant” did not obey the same metropolitan logics. At a time when anticongreganist discourse, policy and practices were set up in France from the 1880s, “double France” in Syria defined itself as congreganist, more Catholic than Protestant, and secular. “L’anticlericalisme n’est pas un produit d’exportation” (*anti-clericalism is no export product*) Leon Gambetta would have exclaimed about the missions in the Levant –the French government, in the hands of the Radical Party, seeking to defend the country’s interests in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup>

The question of secularity was not even a matter in Damascus. That explains the failure of the project of the *Mission laïque française* in Syria before the First World War. It took political conditions to change (with the establishment of the Mandates and the fulfillment of the French ambitions on Syria after the failure of Faysal) for the secular *Mission laïque* to succeed in being established on a permanent basis.

Some authors even wrote that metropolitan persecutions had made the mission in Syria stronger.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gambetta on the *Assemblée nationale*, on May 4, 1877. Actually, Paul Bert in 1885 before leaving for Indochina. (P.) Cabanel, *ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> (Jérôme) Bocquet, « Les lois anticongréganistes et leurs effets au Levant », in (Patrick) Cabanel, (Jean-

### 3. School and mission

Although the intention of the Latin missionaries was to educate cultivated, French-speaking, pious Catholics, ready to train the executives of a liberated Christian community and a French Syria separated from the Ottoman Empire, this concern with the “civilizing mission” seems to be shared by the other missionaries from France in Damascus. The universal Israeli Alliance sought to regenerate a Jewish community, which they considered backward. Protestant proselytizing and Italian or Anglo-Saxon ambitions seemed dreaded by the consulate of France, the Latin congreganists, and the envoys of A.I.U just as well. Schools turned out to be the best means of converting hearts. As various recent studies on the Arab Middle East under the Ottoman domination point out, the missionaries sought to provide “Western” education using the French language. Schools thus turned out to be “the instrument of the mission”.<sup>14</sup> They however also intervened in “a strategy of selection [by the Christians] of education as a means to grip the instruments of Western modernity.”<sup>15</sup> Schools thus met a social demand, they also allowed the members of a congregation to achieve their work of acculturation.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, for all the French schools there would be the same purpose, the same missionary logic which would transcend the divergences between congreganists - Jewish and secular missionaries from France in Syria. Did the schools of the Jewish Alliance obey the same logic, the same strategies and behaviors, as those of the Latin congregations? This is probable, because of the ambitions of the Jewish Alliance and their relationship to the Jewish community of Damascus, from which it tried to squeeze a financial contribution for its schools, and its views on the national question. Hostile towards Zionism and the intrigues of the Palestinian Jewish militants, the Alliance appeared, as well as the Lazarists or the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in

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Dominique) Durand, *Le grand exil des congrégations religieuses françaises 1901-1914*, Paris, Cerf, 2005, p. 387.

<sup>14</sup> (Géraldine) Chatelard, *Briser la mosaïque. Les tribus chrétiennes de Madaba, Jordanie (19-20° s)*, Paris, CNRS, 2004, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> (Florent) Tissot, *Présence missionnaire française et stratégie communautaire des chrétiens catholiques d'Orient. (A travers l'étude de l'apostolat missionnaire des Sœurs de la Charité de Besançon au Liban et en Syrie de 1904 aux années 1950)*, mémoire de DEA EHESS Marseille, 1997, n.p., p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> (Claude) Prudhomme, *Stratégie missionnaire du Saint-Siège sous Léon XIII (1878-1903). Centralisation romaine et défis culturels*, Rome, EFR, 1994, pp. 361-362.

Damascus, as agents of a French Levant.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the relationship between the Lazarists in Damascus and the Jewish world, the Jewish community of the city and the personnel of the Israeli Alliance remain to be understood. It is necessary to also identify the strategies which the Jewish community developed in return, in relation to the range of schools that the congreganists in Bilâd al-Shâm offered. As for the Muslim community, the attractiveness of these schools appeared sometimes larger than the risks they involved. By taking their children away from schools that were considered too traditional, notable families sought to move away from their community. Enrolling Saint-Vincent college often was the first step when moving from the Jewish district of the old city to the external European districts.<sup>18</sup> They feared the proselytizing and the hostility (perceived as anti-semitism or animosity with regard to Islam) of these institutions, but they attended them by default, refusing the secularity of the schools of the Ottoman *tanzimat* (for example *Maktab Anbar*) or of the French *Mission Laïque*, or by choice within a social or community strategy.

We could read the conclusions of the colloquium about “Jews, school and the mission” I organized a week ago in France.

#### *Complementarity of the French school network*

Schools were the privileged scenes for the work of the French missionaries, including “Jewish missionaries of France”. For instance the Catholic schools (those of the congreganists, Lazarists, Marist Brothers, the Sisters of Charity and Franciscan missionaries of Mary) and the Jewish schools (those of the envoys of the Israeli Alliance, rather than those of the Jewish community) and eventually the schools of the Protestant missionaries. Daily life in the schools, strategies set up by the ecclesiastical hierarchies and the families, meetings, possible incidents or polemics and the methods of teaching looked similar. The French missionaries thus all tried to teach in an overall adverse environment, in a way that was both modern and French. This is what we have to

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<sup>17</sup> (Jérôme) Bocquet, Introduction to the international colloque “Judaism, schools and missions in the Mediterranean in colonial times”, Tours, March 2009.

<sup>18</sup> (Jérôme) Bocquet, *Missionnaires français en terre d’islam. Damas 1860-1914*, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2005, p. 185.



understand in order to define competition between these schools, beyond the very question of proselytizing.

Whichever school opened in Bilâd al-Shâm, could one work from this postulate that it followed the same rules? The study of the course of some of these students as well as their denominational distribution would tend to show that the same students sought to incorporate these schools. The presence, within the Saint-Vincent college, of children from the retailing and industrial backgrounds of the al-Kharâb Shiite quarters in Damascus as well as notable Druzes of Jabal, courted by France and Great Britain, stresses the relevance of the lazarist schools in the French school network in Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Thus in these schools in Damascus –the Franciscan missionaries of Mary, the Marist Brothers or the *Filles de la Charité* – both independent and interdependent strategies, of the various congregations and communities, families, Ottoman authorities or French diplomacy, came together.

In Bilâd al-Shâm, through schools, the missionaries wished to get Christians, Jews and Muslims to be fond of France. In answer to the desires of the French Consul in Damascus, with the Saint-Vincent college, they even inaugurated a French “Muslim policy”, while at the same time the lazarist college of Antoura in the Lebanese mountain favored the Maronites supported by the French Consul in Beirut. “All these various races and religions send children to us. We receive Muslims from the best families”, writes the Superior of the Lazarists. For these, we don’t tackle the religious side. They would be moved away, and therefore, it would not be possible to do them any good anymore. The presence of these children in our classes brings us constant relationships with the parents, who are all exquisitely courteous towards us.”<sup>20</sup> The use by the Lazarists of the myth of the Emir Abd el Kader, the savior of the mission at the time of the massacres of the Summer of 1860, until 1914, to justify their establishment amidst the Muslims, shows how equally concerned they are with opening their apostolate to the Muslims.<sup>21</sup> For all

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 173.

<sup>20</sup> (E.) Canitrot, *Au sud de l’île rouge*, Jacques Crouzet, Paris, Librairie vincentienne, 1937, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> (Jérôme) Bocquet, « Abd el Kader, instrument de légitimation « coloniale » ? L’exemple de la mission française de Damas (1860-1939) », « Le legs de l’Émir Abd el-Kader entre particularisme et universalité : approches analytiques », Oran (Algérie) November 2008, to be published.

that, can one mention proselytical practices?

### *Proselytizing*

Several concrete cases of conversion show the reality of this proselytism.<sup>22</sup> Around 1887, the Lazarists still hoped to secretly convert the whole of the Muslim population of the city. It is true that it concealed a game on several scales and often contradictory strategies. Schools, like hospitals, are the best means of conversion of people's hearts to the Church or to France. The Jews of Damascus as well as the Muslim minorities were obvious targets, maintaining competition between the schools of the mission, those of the Israeli Alliance or of the Protestant mission, also present in Syria.

Why then, are archives silent? Initially, it was obviously prudence which guided the missionaries. After their return shortly after the massacres of 1860, the Lazarists thus feigned the greatest circumspection towards Muslims. "As for the Muslims" one of them wrote in the 1880s, "the action of the missionaries can only be exerted on them through education, Rome having prohibited proselytism in this respect for serious reasons." The silence of the archives is also explained by the multiplicity of the speeches of the missionaries. The Lazarists justified their action to the *Propaganda fide* by asserted proselytism whereas they deny it to the French or Ottoman authorities.<sup>23</sup>

The fact remains that this proselytism (whether real or supposed) often masked a preoccupation with maintaining order and discipline in establishments attended by pupils of different confessions and nationalities.

However scarce the observed cases were, for the most reticent members of the Christian and Jewish communities or the Muslim reformists, people's fear of the proselytizing of missionaries constituted an easy *topos* for propaganda against congregations and foreigners in Syria. The Jewish and Muslim communities highly suffered from the apostolate, in schools or hospitals

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<sup>22</sup> Recurring charges of proselytism against the college *Jeanne d'Arc* of Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Damascus, activities of the Christian Mission to the Jews in Palestine or conversion of Jewish pupils in the colleges of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Alexandria, activism of the Lazarists near their Greek pupils in their schools of Mount-Lebanon or the Aegean Sea.

<sup>23</sup> In the questionnaires regularly sent to Rome by the missionaries, several headings enter conversions.

headed by French missionaries, Lazarists, Marists or Jesuits. The Sunni community particularly feared this risk of conversion in the foreign missionary schools, which welcomed a growing number of Muslim students. In Palestine, in the 1920s, the proselytizing which reigned in American Protestant missions caused the same concern and the same anger.<sup>24</sup> Muhammad 'Abduh or Rashīd Ridā had already worried about it.<sup>25</sup> After the war, the danger still seemed present. The newspaper *Al-Fath* in Cairo thus denounced the proselytical activity (*tabshīr*) of the Christian missions.<sup>26</sup> In Syria, in Damascus, Homs or Hama, Muslim associations, like *Jama'īyyat al-gharrat*, were created in the 1920s against the French missionary schools and the monitoring of the High Commission on education.<sup>27</sup> However, during the inter-war period, the Lazarists as well as the Jesuits did not hide their ambitions towards the Druzes or the Alawis.<sup>28</sup> The Jesuits even asked France for guarantees for “the freedom of the souls which, when touched by Christ, want to enter the Catholic Church to know and love true God.”

In France, even at the end of the 1930s, relaying the action of the missionaries established in Lebanon or in Syria, Catholic newspapers were outraged by how the Alawis –converted by the Sunnis- were treated. The headlines of the newspaper *La Croix* indicated that fact in November 1938: “How the Moslems of Damascus understand freedom of conscience”. Indeed, converted Alawis were not able to obtain official recognition of their change of faith in the official vital records.<sup>29</sup>

The reality of this proselytizing reveals several religious and political issues at stake, which seem to turn missionaries into agents of the Latin world and France in the Levant. In obvious

<sup>24</sup> (Henri) Laurens, *La question de Palestine 1922-1947. Une mission sacrée de civilisation*, tome 2, Paris, Fayard, 2002, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> (Anne Laure) Dupont, *Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914), écrivain réformiste et témoin de la Renaissance arabe*, thèse d'histoire, Paris IV, 2001, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Weekly magazine reformist launched by the Syrian al-Dīn Muhibb al-Khatīb (1886-1969), disciple of the sheik salafī Tāhir al-Jazā' irī, a few months before the creation of the Muslim Brothers. As manager of salafist printing spreading the literature wahhabite in Cairo, he was inspired by Rashīd Ridā and the *al-Manār* review. (Catherine) Mayeur-Jaouen, “Les débuts d'une revue néo-salafiste égyptienne : *Al-Fath* de 1926 à 1928”, *Débats intellectuels au Moyen-Orient dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, REMMM, 95/98, 2002, pp. 250-251.

<sup>27</sup> (Elizabeth) Thompson, *Colonial Citizens. Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> (Philipp) Khoury, *Syria and French Mandate*, pp. 515-521. Conversion many alaouites, which sought to flee authority of their sheiks, causes a political scandal in Syria with the beginning of the year 1930. (E.) Thompson, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> *La Croix*, November 15, 1938.

contradiction with the policy of pope Leon XIII, they still called for the conversion of the Eastern catholics at the end of the century. The base of their apostolate remained the will to impose Latin religiousness. Hence an obsession: the fear of Protestant proselytizing. The Lazarists hoped to convert Eastern Christians (Catholic or not) while the Orthodox community in Damascus was less sensitive to proselytizing from foreign religious missions than in that of Beirut.<sup>30</sup> It was mainly through education that the first Latin missionaries tried to prevent boys from “being made Turkish”.<sup>31</sup> Being aware of hagiographic tales of missionaries sent to China or Africa, any Lazarist in Damascus believed that the second half of the 19th century was still a time when everything was possible. He was this “man who left for a virgin land, thrilling evangelism, compared to the inhibiting situation that the clergy was doomed to in anticlerical France.”<sup>32</sup> They imagined they would continue the struggle of the first Lazarists sent to the Mediterranean by Vincent de Paul in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. “In the shadow, under the influence of Lazarist action, conversions of formerly-Christian Muslims occurred, even conversions of Muslims”, they recall.<sup>33</sup> Like their fellow-members who had come to restore the college of Saint-Benoit in Istanbul in the 1830s, the latter had a few simple ideas: to extirpate error and to fight heresy.<sup>34</sup> For the Lazarists, bringing back Eastern Christians to “true faith” justified the “praise of conversion”.<sup>35</sup> The events of Persia just before the war of 1914 also influenced the French missionaries living in Damascus.<sup>36</sup> The missionaries then saw the persecution of the Catholics by the Orthodox.<sup>37</sup> “This movement is designed by the Russians and their 'orthodox' religion, as it is called –an orthodox religion that is schismatic”, they deplored.<sup>38</sup> To them conversion seemed like duty “Against the demon which tries to divert the

<sup>30</sup> (Michael) Davie, “Les Orthodoxes entre Beyrouth. Une *millet* chrétienne dans deux villes ottomanes”, in *State and Society in Syria and Lebanon*, Exeter, Univ. Of Exeter Press, 1993, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> (Bernard) Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique*, Rome, EFR, 1994, p. 465.

<sup>32</sup> (François) Lebrun, dir., *Histoire des catholiques en France du XVe siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Hachette, 1980, p. 438.

<sup>33</sup> (Georges) Goyau, *La Congrégation de la Mission des Lazaristes*, Paris, Grasset, 1938, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> (Max) Roche, *Education, assistance et culture françaises dans l'Empire ottoman*, Isis, Istanbul, 1989, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> (Frédéric) Gugelot, *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1865-1935)*, Paris, CNRS, 1998, p. 70. We can read with interest the thesis of (Oissila) Saaidia, *Catholiques et musulmans sunnites. Discours croisés*, thèse Lyon II, 2001, n.p., pp. 259-317.

<sup>36</sup> Following colonial agreement of August 31, 1907 signed with Great Britain, Russia occupied a broad zone of influence on all North-West of the country, confirming that Russian expansionism started with the annexation of Turkestan in 1884.

<sup>37</sup> (Pierre) Corcket, *Les Lazaristes au Proche-Orient*, Beyrouth, C.M., 1982, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Letter to the general superior of the Congregation of the Mission, March 18, 1912. *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, t. 78, 1913, p. 387.

missions” the general superior wrote, “[the work of the mission] ensures our sanctification.”<sup>39</sup>

The Lazarists were even tempted, as we saw, to convert the Muslim population of the city *en masse* on their return to Damascus. They then tried to privilege only the minority Moslems, Shiites or Druzes, feeding the topos of a hostile propaganda. Still with suspicion towards Islam, particularly at times of important religious holidays, such as Ramadan -which was perceived as a risk for fragile community balances- the missionaries behaved towards the Moslems with a prudence which was not the same towards the Eastern Christians. However, the Lazarists did try to act on Muslim pupils by diverted means. If they took care not to associate them to their services –not in an open way in any case- they were immersed in Christian culture and Latin devotions which pervaded school life, like the biblical texts used in the French language or history lessons.

In spite of the suspicion of proselytizing which hung over the French schools, there were indeed prospects for apostolate. Schools seemed to be the best means of fighting “Muslim fanaticism”. The presence of Muslim students indeed offered a thin possibility of proselytizing, undoubtedly dangerous and illusory.<sup>40</sup> “This connection and common instruction with the Catholics gradually brings down this savage fanaticism which moved them away from the Christians, and this badly contained hatred which occasionally burst against them”, explained a Lazarist missionary in 1887. “At present, particularly in Damascus, a good number of Moslems love the Christians, consider them as brothers and readily do them favors. There is even an already numerous sect which very much comes close to Christianity, studies the Gospel and adopts most Christian ideas. This sect doesn’t dare to get itself noticed yet because it fears the fanaticism of the Old Turks and persecutions from the government, but it extends more and more and, at a given moment, it will undoubtedly lead the movement which seems one day to have to carry the populations of these regions towards Catholicism.”<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>39</sup> Circulaire n °10, 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1881. Avis donnés par T.H.P. Fiat dans ses circulaires.

<sup>40</sup> (F.) Gugelot showed the scarcity of conversions to Catholicism resulting from the French Maghreb at the end of the 19th century, revealing weak Christian proselytism and its thin results in Moslem country. *Op cit.*, pp. 211-219.

<sup>41</sup> Letter of the superior of the Saint-Vincent college, 1887.

Were French schools in Damascus ultimately a “vector of the French language” for minorities, and traditional support of “France of the Levant” -or even of the Muslim communities, targeted by a French “Moslem policy”- in Bilâd al-Shâm? Or were they a “vector of religion”?<sup>42</sup>

Political unrest at the end of the Ottoman Empire and then during the Mandate, the questionings of France with the Levant, and the desires of independence put an end to the missionaries' hopes for conversions. Already in 1914, with the abolition of the capitulations, in 1944 with the independence, the climate was not the same anymore. The law on Secondary Education of December 1944 limited the action of the mission and of these institutions which “will now have to refrain from any proselytizing.”<sup>43</sup> After the Second world war and the campaigns of Arabization of teaching undertaken in the Arab world since independences were granted, the missionary institutions were condemned for having provided an education “to corrupt morals, to weaken patriotic spirit, and to split the citizens.”<sup>44</sup> Although this charge against missionary schools was recurrent, the law has explicitly envisaged to prohibit “proselytical” action towards Moslems.<sup>45</sup> In charge of sectarian schools and groups of youth, Youth Christian Students (JEC), scouts, Marian teams, open to Christians as Moslems, the missionaries are under police surveillance. State cannot tolerate to share its claims to monopolize the education and the control of youth. The influence of Baath Party on the society starting from the middle of the sixties reinforces this mistrust towards the supposed proselytizing of the missions.

In April 1967, a antireligieux lampoon in the military baasist review *Jaysh al-Sha'b* (*Army of people*) denounces the Christian and Muslim religions “sources of obscurantism and drugs breeding fatalism”. In such a hostile environment, it's very difficult for the missionaries to definite their project.

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<sup>42</sup> (Karine) Sanchez-Summerer, « Langue(s) et religion(s) en Palestine mandataire au sein d'institutions éducatives catholiques. Etablissements des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes et sœurs de Saint-Joseph de l'Apparition 1922-1940 », *Langues et religion : une relation complexe dans l'enseignement du français hors de France XVI-XXe siècle*, Sifflès, 37, 2006, p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> Letter of the chief of the Syrian Legation in Paris to J. Chauvel, general secretary of the *Quay d'Orsay*, dated May 28, 1946. (Pierre) Barbusse, *L'action culturelle de la France en Syrie depuis la fin du Mandat*, Damascus, 1948.

<sup>44</sup> Article 7 of the Syrian Order of 1952.

<sup>45</sup> Article 8 of the Syrian Order of 1952. (O.) Saaidia, *op. cit.*, pp. 382, 387.